

The Heart Gallery: Souls captured on paper

by Diane de la Paz, Tacoma Weekly, August 25, 2005

Sharaya's eyes look straight into yours. You can't turn away, can't wipe her warm gaze from your memory.

But just as she pulls you in, she may also give you a jolt. Sharaya is one of the kids in Tacoma's Heart Gallery, a display of photos of children hoping for adoptive families, teens wanting mentors and disabled people seeking employment. The gallery also includes pictures of people with disabilities who need respite care, and seniors wanting conversational companions.

Each has a short, to-the-point caption, like this one beside Sharaya's photo.

"Ten years from now I will be working in a CSI-type job and paying off my college loans.' A confident 16-year-old, Sharaya would like to find the love of a forever family that supports her quest to achieve her college dreams. A quick call to DSHS will begin your journey to adopt a teenage girl."

David's plea hangs on the same wall with Sharaya's.

"I am teaching myself to juggle bean bags with one hand," it begins. Then, "David, 8, plans to go to college so he can afford to buy a skateboard. David also wants to have a kitten 'because they are fun to snuggle with when you sleep.' When he gets hungry, David likes making grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner. Make room in your home and your heart for David. Learn how from DSHS."

Making that "quick call" to the Department of Social and Health Services, of course, is a daunting prospect. Adopting a child, or in Sharaya's case a teenager, is a leap into the realm of the unknown.

The Heart Gallery hosts, a varied group of kids and grownups, realize that. They sought to encourage visitors anyway during the gallery's opening reception on Aug. 18.

Arianna Stallings, seven, was perhaps the bluntest spokesperson. She is one of Sheri Novak's six adopted children.

"You all have to help," she told the gallery-goers. "We don't have room for all of them."

Become a foster parent first, Arianna added. "Foster kids make your family happy."

Deborah Van Cleave, the ebullient mother of three adopted children, also spoke at the Heart Gallery opening. She acknowledged prospective parents' fears, and sought to demystify the foster-to-adopt process. DSHS has changed its system to speed adoptions, Van Cleave said, to reduce the period of time in which "the child's life is on hold."

Go and talk with DSHS' social workers, she added. "Get the information. There are a lot of myths, and it's not as difficult as you might think.

"We have support groups, and mentors. Having that connection with others is great. It helps you feel not so alone. The most important thing is getting that support."

Van Cleave is mom to CeCe, a 16-year-old who goes to Lincoln High School; Ned, five, a Grant Elementary student, and Teresa, three. "We don't have the knowledge of what they've been through," before adoption. "We're there to support them so they can be the best they can be," she said. "It's an experience I wouldn't trade for the world."

This is the Heart Gallery's first year in Tacoma. The idea for the display came from a project that began in Santa Fe, N.M. There, professional photographers volunteered to take pictures of children available for adoption through the state Children, Youth and Families Department. The pictures went on display in 2001, and since then the Heart Gallery has been replicated in 40 states, said DSHS administrator Samantha Barker.

Washington's Heart Gallery started last year in Seattle.

Tacoma's Heart Gallery photos will be displayed through September at 1742 Pacific Ave., in the West Coast Grocery building beside BKB Gallery. Some photos will also hang at Harmon Pub & Brewery, at 1938 Pacific Ave., through Aug. 30. A selection of 20 portraits will be in Puyallup Fair's Education Building from Sept. 22 through Sept. 25.

Twenty-seven Puget Sound photographers gave their time to create the pictures.

"The idea of using photography to help out in such a profound way as

this gave me chills," said Julie Watts, an Auburn photographer. "There's something about a portrait, about seeing the face of someone you don't know, that makes you feel like you know them."

The photos in the Heart Gallery "are here to open hearts," added Stefanie Felix, a photographer from Seattle. "They give insights into lives that (viewers) might not otherwise know about."

Carmel Smith, a teacher, saw a newspaper article about DSHS' need for mentors back in 1996. She was reminded of the Langston Hughes poem, "A Dream Deferred."

"What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore-and then run?

... Maybe it just sags - like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?"

Smith called DSHS, which matched her to Gretchen, a troubled 14-year-old.

"We're still friends today," Smith said. Gretchen, now 23, recently said, "Boy, I wish you were there when I was a little bit younger." In Pierce County alone, some 400 teens have asked DSHS to match them with mentors.

"Just take time," Smith said, "to help a child whose dream has been deferred."

The people whose photos compose the Heart Gallery, however, aren't all looking for volunteers. Some, like Jennifer Crane, represent the 1,900 Pierce County disabled people seeking work.

"I'm definitely not satisfied with just collecting a disability check," said Crane, a paraplegic who uses a wheelchair. She is interested in working with computers, and in being "productive in society." Most people with disabilities, "you'll find are very resilient and appreciate the opportunity for employment," added Crane, whose forthrightness grabbed and held the Heart Gallery audience's attention.

To some, the Heart Gallery exhibition might be overwhelming. It puts human beings on display, almost like pets awaiting adoption.

The need for adoptive families, mentors, caregivers and employers necessitates this format, said Blake Chard, DSHS' deputy secretary of

government and community affairs.

"Over 100 children, infant to 18 years old, are available for adoption," in Pierce County, Chard said. Some 1,100 people with disabilities need respite care, and 1,900 need employment.

The Heart Gallery has gotten results. Over the past year and a half that various versions of the gallery have been mounted around the state, scores of Washingtonians have called DSHS for information. Twelve of the 21 children shown in Heart Gallery portraits have been adopted.

Spend a little time looking at these close-ups, urged Chard, and your initial feelings of trepidation go away.

"Look into their eyes," he said. "Consider the possibilities."

What: The Heart Gallery, portraits of children, teens, seniors and disabled people who need support

Where, when: West Coast Grocery building, 1742 Pacific Ave., Tacoma, open 7 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Saturday through September

Harmon Pub & Brewery, 1938 Pacific Ave., open 11 a.m.-midnight Monday-Saturday, noon- 8 p.m. Sunday through Aug. 30

Puyallup Fair Education Building, Sept. 22-25
Admission: Free